

THE NEW MARITIME STRATEGY

The Rest of the Story

Robert C. Rubel

The U.S. Navy's new maritime strategy is contained in a fairly terse ten-page document that speaks in broad terms about how sea power should be used through the next ten to fifteen years to defend the nation and its global interests. Soon after its release, analysts, pundits, and naval officers began to offer criticisms and interpretations. A number of the articles, blogs, and e-mails demonstrate a clear misunderstanding of the strategy, or at least a failure to understand what the strategy is meant to do. The author, as the Dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the Naval War College, was in charge of the project to develop maritime strategy options and analyses for the Navy Staff. Without engaging in a defense of the strategy as written, this article will leverage its author's perspec-

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tive to provide a deeper understanding of the strategy by discussing the findings that emerged from the workshops and games that produced the options, as well as some of the background logic that governed our approach to the project. It will also offer some personal analysis of the strategy's underlying intent.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the maritime strategy was written by a combination of officers on the staff of the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information, Plans, and Strategy (N3/N5) and some participating civilian academics and contractors. The Naval War College delivered to them a series of options, to be discussed later, which they used as raw material in the composition of the strategy

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document. Throughout the development process, everyone avoided ascribing ideas to individuals, so that positions would not harden because of “ownership.” Thus, while no particular person can be pointed out as the strategy’s progenitor, a clear intellectual audit trail winds through the developmental events, including a war game and workshops, to the published strategy.

In June 2006, during the Secretary of the Navy–sponsored Current Strategy Forum at Newport, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Michael Mullen, called in his keystone speech for the development of a new maritime strategy. He called for a strategy “of and for its time” and enjoined us to “elevate the discussion.” Within two weeks after this speech, Vice Admiral John Morgan, the Deputy CNO for Strategy and Operations, visited the College to provide more detailed tasking. He specified that the strategy development process was to be a “competition of ideas” and was to be open and collaborative. These parameters were themselves rather revolutionary in the history of maritime strategy development, but two even more important pieces of guidance emerged from our discussions as well. When asked whether the project should be internationalized, he said yes. When asked if we were really working with a blank sheet of paper, with no a priori assumptions of fleet size or policy constraints, he said yes. This set of instructions put in train a strategic logic vector that heavily influenced project design and the nature of the final product.

From the outset, this project would not simply derive from existing strategic guidance, such as the National Security Strategy or the National Defense Strategy. This may seem somehow subversive to those who are used to military planning processes in which guidance from higher headquarters is regarded as holy writ. However, consider our situation—the project was undertaken at the end of the Bush administration and our requirement was to look ahead twenty years. We could not responsibly make the assumption that current U.S. security strategy would remain in place, and there was no adequate way to predict the direction of the next administration’s policies. Our solution was to postulate four different potential strategy vectors of a future administration, which resulted in having four U.S. teams in a strategic war game we conducted. The first team represented a “Primacy” strategy, in which the United States would attempt to maintain its near-hegemonic status in the world. The second team adopted a “Selective Engagement” posture, in which the United States would focus its efforts on averting conflict among major powers. The third team played a “Cooperative Security” strategy, in which the nation committed itself to seeking security through multilateralism and international institutions. The fourth team represented an “Offshore Balancing” strategy, in which the United States retracted certain security guarantees and caused major powers to balance each other.

As the project transpired we attempted to find maritime strategy options that would be valid across two or more of these policy futures. Frankly, freeing ourselves from the dictates of current policy allowed us to perceive and accept gaming outcomes we might otherwise have missed. War games tend to “whisper” to you—that is, they produce subtle results within the context of their play that can be ignored easily, especially if they are things that defy conventional wisdom or are threatening to the game’s sponsors.¹ Our strategic foundations game did indeed provide whispers, and we were able to hear them.

One of the things that improved our hearing was an initial workshop in which we brought together some of the “old hands” who had participated in the development of the 1980s Maritime Strategy (capitalized here to distinguish it from the current effort).² In that workshop, one of the participants asserted that what that strategy had had, and what had been missing since the end of the Cold War, was context. What he meant was that the Maritime Strategy told naval officers who they would fight, why, and where, in addition to how. The “. . . From the Sea” series of white papers issued in the 1990s had not—they had been more doctrinal in nature. The Navy needed to rediscover context if its strategy was to be compelling and useful. Another thread of discussion involved the need to “reglobalize” the Navy. There was no intellectual glue that linked operations in the Philippine Sea with those in the Persian Gulf or the Caribbean, although most participants in the workshop, as well as those in a number of different games in recent years, instinctively felt that what happened in one part of the world had important ripple effects in other parts. Thus, as we designed and played our strategic game, we were alert for any indications of what might constitute a new context for maritime strategy and a basis for global vision.

The Strategic Foundations Game took about six weeks to play and involved the four U.S. teams, one for each potential policy future, and five “strategic entities,” countries and nonstate groups selected for detailed play. Teams were directed to develop grand strategies for the next twenty years that would maximize their security, aspirations, and interests. Non-U.S. teams were not required to demonstrate hostility to the United States unless that made sense in terms of their grand strategies. This represented a departure from normal gaming, in which worst-case scenarios are the rule. In the open adjudication sessions in which each team proclaimed its strategy, a compelling central thread emerged. Each state had an intrinsic interest in the effective functioning of the global system of trade, even such “rogue” actors as Iran and North Korea. Only al-Qa’ida and associated groups had endemic hostility to the system. This insight produced the “big idea” that the protection of the existing global system of trade and security (as opposed to the process of globalization) provided both the context for the new strategy and the intellectual glue that tied together all regions of the

world. Thus the notion of system security and defense figures prominently in the maritime strategy document, both “up front,” in its introduction, and in the description of the maritime strategic concept. This could not have been more important—even, in its way, more revolutionary. It provided a basis for not only a maritime strategy but a national grand strategy not aimed against a particular country or threat but positive, without being aggressive. The strategic concept upon which the maritime strategy is based—defense of the global system of commerce and security—offers the opportunity for future administrations to adopt a clearly articulated grand strategic defensive posture, with all the political advantages that brings. As a defensive strategy, it makes global maritime cooperation much easier to attain.

While the game and workshops had no trouble identifying current and future threats, except in the case of Islamic extremists, these threats were either nascent or equivocal. Is China a true threat? How about a resurgent Russia? Iran and North Korea, while clearly potential aggressors, were not existential threats, and at least at this juncture did not seem poised to attack anyone. Moreover, glimmers of progress in reining in their aggressive tendencies seemed to exist. Thus it was difficult to pursue traditional threat-based planning convincingly. In developing the strategy, we realized that one of the real dangers, especially with regard to emerging powers, is that considering them hostile for planning purposes could be self-fulfilling. Thus we tried not to engage reflexively in threat-based or capabilities-based planning, techniques that would naturally assume the breakout of war. Instead, we realized, we had opportunities to disrupt the flow of events toward war. Accordingly, the new strategy reflects what I call “opportunity based” planning—positioning the maritime services to take positive actions to prevent war, protect the global system, and create a better peace.

The injunction to elevate the discussion also greatly affected the development process and the nature of the end product. The Navy has been afflicted in the past few years with a controversy of sorts over force structure. One camp asserts that there are new mission sets, such as homeland defense, the Long War, and humanitarian assistance, that require new kinds of forces. The other camp holds that the Navy should only build high-end combat forces and that these can be effectively used for less “kinetic” missions. A solution could not be found if the “dialogue” continued at the level of forces; therefore, the strategy project banned any discussion of force structure. Participants mostly followed this rule, and the options presented to the project’s executive committee, consisting of flag-level representatives from the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, contained nothing that would provide stimulus or opportunity for those who equate strategy with force structure to drag the discussion in that direction. As a result, the staffing and vetting process forced the “three stars” and “four stars” to respond in

kind, and this appears to have generated both a new level of dialogue in the Navy and a new strategic consensus. There are many who are frustrated that the new strategy makes no mention of force structure, but it does seem to provide an overarching logic from which future force structure could be deduced. At the very least, it is a consensus document that has to some degree knit the Navy together.

At this nexus of force structure and strategy, it is useful to interpret the strategy in light of the ideas of the two greatest maritime strategy theorists, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett. In a sense, the new strategy is very “Corbettian,” in that it requires that control of the seas—at least in the new sense of maritime security and maritime domain awareness—be exercised day in and day out. Corbett described two traditional concentration points for the Royal Navy, one near the French island of Ushant off Brittany to control the Channel, and the other in the Downs (a roadstead near Dover) to guard against invasion threats from the North Sea. These concentration points were established because Britain’s proximity to them afforded little geographic strategic depth. However, fleets concentrated there could disperse for “systemic” sea-control duties, being always ready to regroup if a major threat developed near home.³ Similarly, the new maritime strategy prescribes two concentration points, one in the Arabian Gulf and the other in northeast Asia, where important economic elements of the global system are near potentially aggressive states.⁴ Per current U.S. Navy practice, these “combat credible” forces will “starburst,” or disperse, for engagement purposes but can regroup quickly in case of need. Corbett said that commercial shipping elsewhere could be protected by cruisers and the “flotilla”—smaller ships that could deal with most threats short of first-class forces—types not normally encountered in the far-flung reaches of the empire. The analog today is the “thousand-ship navy,” the loose network of navies cooperating for maritime security. The U.S. part of that flotilla will be those units assigned to Global Fleet Stations and other, more ad hoc deployments to catalyze greater levels of cooperation. The key word is *catalyze*. We would not build a fleet of patrol craft to do other nations’ jobs for them. We would dispatch ships and other kinds of forces that would help other navies and coast guards adopt congruent strategies and provide them with the training and perhaps equipment to implement them. The exact types and numbers of forces required are not self-evident and need to be the subject of analysis and gaming.

The notion of two deployment hubs where strong naval forces are concentrated follows the logic of system defense. Just as Corbett acknowledged the necessity for concentration points in the home islands due to their proximity to threats emanating from Europe—that is, a lack of strategic depth—so too does this maritime strategy prescribe fleet concentrations in areas where there is little

geographic space in which to absorb an attack. The oil fields of Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia are uncomfortably near Iran; Seoul is within artillery range of North Korea; and Taiwan is only a narrow strait away from the power of the People's Liberation Army. Certainly the oil fields of the Persian Gulf and the productive capacity of South Korea and Japan are key organs of the global system and must be protected. If deterrence fails, we must be ready and able to defend these areas. Again, the exact type and nature of forces needed to do this is not self-evident, especially since rapid technological development overseas has significantly morphed the kinds of sea-denial threats we will face. They must, however, be the most robust type of high-end combat forces.

The strategy has its Mahanian aspects too. One aspect of Mahan's writing that is widely ignored or misunderstood is his focus on deterrence. Mahan's world was characterized by the existence of great powers overseas that had navies capable of conducting operations in the Western Hemisphere. Mahan worried about the defense of the soon-to-be-opened Panama Canal and about other European adventurism in Latin America. His prescription for a strong battle fleet and its deployment was based as much on deterring outside intervention in the Americas as it was on protecting American interests overseas.⁵ This notion of deterring a range of major powers through a strong, high-end fleet is an intrinsic part of the new strategy. Moreover, Mahan's prescription for a consortium of cooperating navies belonging to like-minded powers has a strong echo in the new strategy. In Mahan's era, Britain was the preeminent naval power, but there were others on the rise, including Germany, Japan, and the United States. Mahan could see that even the Royal Navy might not be able to police the world in an era where capital ships were becoming ever more expensive and any single nation might not be able to keep the seas free around the world. Thus he proposed that the navies of several nations act in concert (not necessarily in alliance) to make sure regional powers could not close off large parts of the ocean to trade.⁶ Today, even though the United States enjoys a measure of naval relative advantage Mahan could not have dreamed of, the world is still too big for a single navy to act as sheriff of the seas. Therefore, the new maritime strategy advocates a consortium of navies and coast guards working together to assure maritime security, the new manifestation of sea control.

The strategy also implies a return by the U.S. Marine Corps to its expeditionary roots. The global distribution of forces for catalyzing cooperative relationships, preventing or containing local disruptions before they impact the global system, and for rendering various kinds of assistance is a recipe for the kind of flexible maritime maneuver for which the Marines are famous.

Prevention of war is a naturally deduced mission from the concept of system protection. Throughout history, nothing has been more disruptive to the free

movement of global trade than war among the major powers. Niall Ferguson in his *The War of the World* makes the case that the world was globalizing in the decades leading up to World War I. It was a world of multiple great powers that enjoyed unprecedented levels of prosperity but that was also infected by nonstate actors with various agendas. This world slid into a ruinous global war whose consequences afflicted it for more than seventy-five years.⁷ One can make the case that, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the world is just now getting back to globalizing in the way it was before the Great War tore it apart. Mark Twain famously said that history does not repeat itself but rhymes. Thus, in this globalizing world that is populated by one big navy and a number of growing ones, an implicit aim of the new maritime strategy is to help prevent a future slide into global catastrophe such as that of 1914.

There was another element of thought that attended the design of the strategy development process. The focus on grand strategy had not only to do with elevating the discussion in order to untangle force-structure controversies. More broadly, there was a feeling among several researchers in key positions that since the Cold War the United States had lacked a concept around which a coherent national grand strategy could coalesce. In the author's personal view, the concept of containment that had guided American policy and strategy throughout the Cold War had not been replaced with anything of similar geostrategic rationality. Most importantly, because the global conceptual glue mentioned earlier has been missing, American policy and strategy have tended to view the world as a collection of regions, each of which can be approached as an independent entity. The result has been that the United States, through successive administrations, has backed its way into a de facto Eurasian continentalist grand strategy, in which it has committed vast resources to projects of the kind one would expect to see from a major Eurasian land power attempting to establish buffer zones, almost as if California butted up against Iran. These projects included the enlargement of NATO to the east, the "Stans' project" to secure bases and influence in the heart of Eurasia, establishment of ballistic missile defenses in Poland, and the invasion of Iraq. The danger of this rather ad hoc and inadvertent grand strategic vector is that it is leading to strategic overextension. There has been no compelling alternate vision or concept to deflect its thrust. The new maritime strategy does not, in and of itself, constitute that alternate vision, but our goal in helping formulate it was to find the kernel of an idea that could translate into a global concept that does not require the United States to intervene everywhere it sees trouble and that provides criteria upon which the advisability of potential projects could be judged. Neither the Weinberger nor Powell doctrine possesses suitable breadth of vision to serve in this role.⁸

It should be said at this point that the strategic logic expressed above was not meant to be a recipe for disengagement. “Offshore Balancing” was indeed one of the four U.S. policy futures examined, but in the end nobody thought that the United States should retreat from its strategic alliances or from its forward engagement, and especially not from the forward-deployed posture of its forces. Rather, it is meant to be an injunction to look at the world as a whole. At the global level, because the world is 70 percent water, grand strategy necessarily takes on a maritime flavor. Moreover, Eurasia is just one land mass; there are others. The United States is about to establish Africa Command. Africa is second only to Eurasia in size, and if Eurasia can absorb all the strategic resources of a powerful nation, then Eurasia, Africa, South America, and North America can overwhelm any power that seeks to use land superiority to assure its security. Leverage must be sought, maneuver on a global scale made possible, and criteria for investment and risk established. Only a global, and therefore maritime, grand strategic concept can provide the needed perspective and guidance. Thus it was from hopes of at least initiating a new dialogue on national grand strategy that the maritime strategy development process took its cue.

As it turned out, the Strategic Foundations Game and the several workshops did not produce the maritime strategy options in a straightforward way. Naval War College researchers were left with a considerable body of data, but the planned events produced no clear definition of options. Thus they set about trying to deduce strategy options from the four policy futures. This work produced five options. The first, called “Winning Combat Power Forward,” was derived from the Primacy policy future and called for strong, war-winning forces to be deployed in the northern Arabian Sea and in northeast Asia. The underpinning assumption was that since deterrence could not be relied upon and sufficient strategic depth in these areas was lacking, strong forces must be positioned where they would be needed. The second option was based on the Offshore Balancing policy future and called for U.S. naval forces to be forward deployed only in the Persian Gulf. The rest of the Navy would remain in home waters, in a “surge” status. Monetary savings of this posture would be used to increase force structure or to transform the Navy. The third option called for a focus on securing the global commons as a key element in the health of the global system. This option seemed to have relevance across most of the policy futures. The fourth option, one that came “over the transom” from outside the College, called for high-end forces to combat anti-access capabilities in northeast Asia and low-end forces for the Long War and engagement elsewhere. The final option, another one that came in from an outside source, was an outgrowth of the Selective Engagement policy future and called for raising war prevention to the same level of importance as war winning. Prevention was to be achieved through a combination of deterrence through

strength and widespread engagement to reduce the causes of discontent, resource competition, and failed governance that could spawn wars.

These five options were offered to the Executive Committee. These were quickly winnowed down to three: war-winning power forward, securing the global commons, and war prevention. These three were carried forward for staffing and, eventually, were all combined into a single strategy—the one that has been published.

In looking at the completed document, an important aspect to note about the strategy is that it is meant to operate continuously. In this respect it is very different from contingent warfighting strategies of the past that would only be invoked in case of war. It is also different from the doctrinal strategy contained in the “. . . From the Sea” white papers. This strategy is meant to prevent wars and ensure a better peace by deploying and operating forces in a systemic fashion. Some have termed it a policy, not a strategy, and that may be true, but in my view it constitutes a way of achieving strategic ends, which makes it a true strategy.

Another way to assess strategies is to consider how they use force to achieve their goals. Some are meant to achieve definitive checkmates of an enemy, either through brute force or maneuver. Others are coercive, posing threats or imposing destruction in order to extract concessions. This strategy is catalytic; its aim is to get our maritime services, our future administrations, and indeed all governments and navies of the world thinking in terms of cooperating to protect the global system.

The new strategy was announced in October 2007, and already there has been considerable analysis and critique. In reviewing the articles and blogs on the strategy, I have observed two principal criticisms or objections to it. The first is that it does not identify specific threats. A number of commentators feel that the strategy should have specifically mentioned China, Iran, and North Korea, at a minimum, as threats that need to be countered. My answer to this is that if the strategy’s purpose is to prevent war among major powers and generate the widest possible maritime cooperation, why create hostility by singling out specific countries as threats? That is especially the case with China, with which we have a deeply interdependent economic relationship and which is working hard on conducting a “peaceful rise” foreign policy. It turns out that the strategy is getting some favorable reviews from the Chinese, which seems to me to be a small step forward that would not have taken place had we listed that nation as a threat. As the UNESCO preamble says: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be erected.” To this end the Naval War College has already started implementing the strategy, by hosting a workshop with the Chinese navy on cooperation and avoidance of incidents. I think that remarks made concerning naval cooperation between the United States and China by a Chinese

scholar in attendance at the workshop bear repeating here: “Thus, cooperation on noncompetitive issues may lay the interactive and cognitive basis for further joint efforts to mitigate the consequences of maritime and naval competition.”

Another criticism is that the strategy does not prescribe force structure. As I already mentioned, the controversy over force structure that exists in the Navy cannot be solved by simply declaring a particular fleet size or composition in the strategy. For starters, such a strategy would have never survived the staffing process. By focusing on global strategic issues and ways, the strategy provides a basis for evaluating the utility of future force-structure proposals and avoids “taking sides.”

No strategy document of ten pages can adequately explain the complex thinking that spawned it. It is clear to those who worked on developing the document that it can be easily misinterpreted, which is the price for being concise. It is also the price of producing a consensus document based on a highly collaborative development process. But we hope that separate explanations, such as this one, can help people better interpret what the maritime strategy document is really saying.

NOTES

1. For this and other gaming phenomena, see the author’s “The Epistemology of War Gaming,” *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 108–28, esp. p. 124ff.
2. For the development of that strategy see John B. Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the U.S. Navy’s Maritime Strategy, 1977–1986*, Newport Paper 19 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2004).
3. Sir Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1918). See part 2, chap. 3, for a discussion of concentration and dispersal; see part 2, chap. 2, for a discussion of the roles of cruisers and the flotilla.
4. U.S. Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, pp. 4–5, available at www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf and reprinted in the *Naval War College Review* (Winter 2008), at www.nwc.navy.mil/press/review/documents/NWCRW08.pdf.
5. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918), pp. 18–19. See also his *The Interest of America in Seapower Present and Future* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1918), pp. 182–83.
6. Mahan, *Interest of America in Sea Power Present and Future*, pp. 110–16. Interestingly, Mahan talks about the need not to force alliances but to let common interests, in this case between the United States and Great Britain, lead to a natural naval cooperation. This very much reflects the logic of today’s Global Maritime Partnership—formerly known as the “thousand-ship navy.”
7. Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2006) p. 73.
8. The Weinberger Doctrine, enunciated in 1984, and its derivative successor the Powell Doctrine (really a neologism concocted by journalists, but see Powell’s article “U.S. Forces: Challenges Ahead” in *Foreign Affairs* for Winter 1992/1993) pose a series of questions that should be answered in the affirmative before military action is deemed both appropriate and practicable. The first question—Is a vital national security interest threatened?—reveals the shortcoming of both, as neither offers any geostrategic concept that would help an administration answer it clearly.